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SOME LITERARY ASPECTS OF THE ABSENCE OF TRAGEDY IN THE CLASSICAL SANSKRIT DRAMA

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EVERYONE who is acquainted with Sanskrit dramatic literature is aware that one of the most striking characteristics of the so-called classical drama is the absence of a tragic ending. The discovery of the manuscripts of the thirteen plays attributed to Bhāsa proves that this was not true of the older dramas, as some of them are real tragedies. But this fact only makes more puzzling and more interesting the problem of the consistency with which the later dramatists avoided the tragic ending.

In a number of the later plays there are many distressing occurrences during the progress of the action, but there is never any tragedy in the sense of calamity which remains at the close of the last act. There are near approaches to this but the tragic outcome is always prevented by the timely assistance of a friend or the intervention of the gods.

As Dr. Lindenau has pointed out in his Bhāsa-Studien,[1] there must have been known to Bhāsa a form of the Nāṭya-Śāstra older than the recension we have. In this older form the strict rules concerning the happy ending were probably lacking. In the Bhārata known to us, however, and in other dramaturgical works, the rules on this point of avoiding an unhappy ending are very definite and they were very strictly followed by the classical dramatists.

The text-books of dramaturgy, as we have them, in giving the different conclusions which a play might have, seem to make no provision for anything opposed to the ultimate happiness of the hero and heroine,[2] and it is distinctly stated that the death of the hero or principal person should not occur anywhere in the play.[3]

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[1] *Bhāsa-studien: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des altindischen Dramas*, von Dr. Max Lindenau, Leipzig 1918, p. 29.

[2] See G. C. O. Haas, *Daśarūpa*, tr. and text (1912), pp. 92 and 145; Lévi, *Le théatre indien* (1890), p. 86.

[3] *DR*, p. 93.

Concerning one type of play[4] it is stated that the death of a great person must not be presented even though it took place in the legend from which the plot is derived.[5] Not only must the hero and the heroine suffer no calamity at the end of the play but they must not even be sorrowful.

There were a number of violations of the rules concerning the things considered indecorous to present before the eyes of the audience,[6] but usually they took place off-stage. Even the death of the hero and heroine occurs but there is always a quick restoration and all ends happily.[7]

I have said that the dramatists of the later plays adhered strictly to the rules regarding the happy ending. I recognize the fact that the rules, as we know them, may have been made after the plays were written, but even if this were so there must have been a strong tradition which had become firmly established, otherwise there would never have been the remarkable consistency we find in the technique of the plays.

Whether written or unwritten there seems no doubt that a deep veneration for these rules is the cause of lack of tragedy in the later Sanskrit drama.

There is no reason, I believe, to think that some of the writers of these plays could not have written real tragedies if they had so wished. There is an abundance of evidence to show that these playwrights were keen psychologists, and they were certainly well versed in the working out of cause and effect. With these qualifications and the ability, so amply proved in numerous passages, to portray deep and noble emotions, we are justified in concluding that the failure to write tragedy was not due to the inability of the writers.

In spite of the fine qualities of many of the Sanskrit plays we are almost sure, in reading those which are essentially potential tragedies, to find ourselves wishing they had continued so to the end. The effect upon us is that of the modern melodrama—the heart may be satisfied but the artistic sense suffers a shock.

It is the purpose of this paper to consider how a few of these

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[4] Īhāmṛga.

[5] *DR*, p. 105; Lévi, p. 145.

[6] For examples see Mṛcchakaṭikā, Act 3, and Viddhaśālabhañjikā, Acts 3 and 4, Gray tr., *JAOS* vol. 27.

[7] See Caṇḍa-Kauśika, Nāgānanda, and Mṛcchakaṭikā.

plays could be changed into tragedies without altering the psychology of the characters, in fact changing nothing but the ending, and perhaps making a slight readjustment of scenes.

Let us take, for example, the Vikramorvaśī of Kālidāsa. In order to obtain the invariable happy conclusion the author has greatly changed the original story of Urvaśī and King Purūravas, which allowed them to remain together so long as the King did not behold the son to be borne to him by Urvaśī. By removing the inevitable tragedy of such a love Kālidāsa has weakened his drama from the artistic standpoint. Although he had a fine tragic plot all ready for his poetic touch, in order to avoid the tragedy, he lowered his heroine from her divine estate and even caused the great divinity, Indra, to break his word.

Practically the only change of any importance needed to make a tragedy of the Vikramorvaśī would be in the last scene. We can easily imagine the fine scene, between Urvaśī and Purūravas, that Kālidāsa might have written, in which the king is in a tragic conflict of emotion between his joy in beholding, for the first time, his son and heir, and his agony of sorrow at the loss of Urvaśī resulting from the sight of this same child.

A further example is the Uttara-Rāma-Carita of Bhavabhūti. Out of the material of this play could have been made a great tragedy. If Rāma's moral conflict between his kingly duties and his love for his wife had been kept the central theme, and the whole play had thus been based upon it; if the banishment of Sītā, after much inward struggle and spiritual suffering, had come toward the end of the play, we might have had a tragedy worthy even of Shakespeare. This would have been the more assured through Bhavabhūti's power of description, his tenderness and beauty of thought, and his inherent sense for the dramatic.

The Nāgānanda of Harṣa could quickly be transformed into a tragedy by changing some of the lighter scenes slightly and eliminating the intervention of the gods at the end. If Jīmūtavāhana were not restored to life the play would be not only more tragic but more artistic. A fine contrast could have been made between the hero's love for his bride and his devotion to what he felt to be his compelling duty. The hero has sacrificed his life willingly and we feel that, according to all the rules of art, he should not come to life again.

Bhavabhūti's Mālatīmādhava has often been called the Romeo and Juliet of the Sanskrit drama. To any one who is not familiar

with the subject this comparison with Shakespeare's play would naturally imply that Mālatīmādhava is a tragedy. There is a similarity, indeed, between the two dramas in many points, and there are several near approaches to tragedy in this Sanskrit play, but all ends well. This play is very dramatic and the elements of tragedy are strong. To develop these but few changes would need to be made. The father of Mālatī should appear as one of the principal characters. His fear of the king's disfavor could be strongly dwelt upon and contrasted with his love for his daughter. By showing this conflict as a moral struggle the tragic note would be established at once. Nandana, the king's favorite, to whom the king wishes Mālatī married, would have to appear in person in order to give a contrast with Mādhava, the hero. The very fine scene at the end, in which Mālatī wanders upon the field of the dead and is finally about to be offered as a victim to the dreadful goddess Cāmuṇḍā, need not have been changed at all. All that is needed to make the play a real Romeo and Juliet is to delay the hero in his arrival upon the field of the dead just about one minute. Such an ending would be just retribution to the father for sacrificing his child's happiness rather than risk the king's disfavor.

The Caṇḍa-Kauśika of Kshemīśvara is filled with tragic incidents from the time the king is cursed by the angry hermit to the end of the play, when the little prince, whose death occurs as the final overwhelming sorrow, is restored to life by the gods and the king receives again his lost kingdom. Nothing but divine intervention could possibly have saved this play from being a complete tragedy.

These are suggestions simply to show how some of the Sanskrit dramas might have been, without much change excepting the final outcome, made tragedies worthy of high honor, and how these have probably been lost to us through the rules prohibiting unhappy endings.

I have not mentioned the incident in Harṣa's Priyadarśikā of the heroine being bitten by a serpent and seeming to be dead, nor in the Mṛcchakaṭikā, ascribed to Śūdraka, of the apparent killing of Vasantasenā, because they are merely dramatic devices used to further the plot and not the logical tragic result of previous actions. These incidents might be compared to the supposed death of Hermione in the Winter's Tale, of Imogen in Cymbeline, or of Hero in Much Ado About Nothing. I should mention in this connection the Svapnavāsavadattā, one of the Bhāsa plays. In this

play the false report of the Queen's death is used to bring about the happy ending. Here the audience knows from the beginning that the Queen is not really dead.

We know that at least as early as Kālidāsa the strict rules, whether written or traditional, barring tragedy from the Hindu stage, were firmly established and closely observed. What caused the introduction of these rules we do not know. Keith has attempted to explain the invariable happy ending by finding its origin in the ritual of the spring festival in which summer triumphs over winter.[8] Of course in the light of the Bhāsa plays this explanation would lose its force. Lindenau believes the solution is to be sought in the simple fact of the dramatists' yielding to the taste and demand of the public.[9]

I cannot feel that the last word has been said on this very interesting phase of Hindu thought as shown in the drama. The evidence does not seem yet to be sufficient for a final judgment. Perhaps Dr. Belvalkar, in his promised critical edition of the Nāṭyaśāstra, will have some new theory to offer which may help to clear up the problem.

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[8] 'Origin of the Drama', *JRAS* 1912, p. 423.

[9] *Bhāsa-studien*, p. 31, note 1.